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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effect of reference group norms on individual attitudes when these norms were transmitted to the individual via the results of an opinion poll. In particular, the study was concerned with the strength of a prior attitude toward an issue and the degree that a reference group could influence attitudes. It was hypothesized that the effect of reference group norms would be mediated by prior attitude polarization. In a sample of 180 introductory psychology students, subjects who received arbitrary opinion poll results supposedly reflecting the norms of a positive reference group significantly conformed to those norms when compared to a control group. Support for the mediational hypothesis was obtained, in that subjects conformed to a significantly greater degree toward norms associated with prior non-polarized attitudes than with prior polarized attitudes. Implications concerning the use of political opinion polls are discussed. (Author/LH)

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The Effect of Reference Groups, Opinion Polls, and Attitude Polarization on Attitude Formation and Change

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Abstract

This study examined the effect of reference group norms on individual attitudes when these norms were transmitted to the individual via the results of an opinion poll. It was hypothesized that the effect of reference group norms would be mediated by prior attitude polarization. In sample of 180 introductory psychology students, subjects who received arbitrary opinion poll results supposedly reflecting the norms of a positive reference group significantly conformed to those norms when compared to a control group. Support for the mediational hypothesis was obtained in that subjects conformed to a significantly greater degree towards norms associated with prior non-polarized attitudes than with prior polarized attitudes. Implications concerning the use of political opinion polls are discussed.

The Effect of Reference Groups, Opinion Polls, and Attitude Polarization on Attitude Formation and Change

The concept of the reference group has received extensive use in both psychological and sociological research to explain both individual and group behavior. Since the introduction of the concept by Hyman (1942), the term "reference group" has been defined in a variety of ways (Kelley, 1968; Bott, 1954; Turner, 1956; Sherif, 1953; Shibutani, 1955). For research purposes the concept has been operationalized as any real or imagined group whose norms, values, or standards influence an individual's attitudes, beliefs, or behavior.

Newcomb (1950) added another dimension to the reference group concept. He proposed that a reference group can have either a positive or a negative orientation. In his own research, Newcomb (1950) found that attitudes were both stronger and more persistent when positive and negative reference groups operated in tandem than when only one type of reference group was in operation. The negative reference group has been the subject of empirical investigation to a much smaller degree than the positive reference group, although there have been a small number of studies which have examined the negative reference group concept. Fishbein (1963) found that negative reference group orientation was

associated with perceived threat and unfavorable orientation. Hyman (1969) suggests that negative reference groups can impact the socialization process with regard to stability and change.

A variety of studies have given support to the proposition that reference groups can influence attitudes. Fendrich (1967) found reference groups to be related to racial attitudes. Walsh, Ferrel, and Tolone (1976) found that sexual attitudes were related to reference group norms. Houseknecht (1977) found reference groups to be related to women's attitudes toward having children. Stone, Miranne, and Ellis (1979) found reference groups to be associated with adolescents' attitudes towards drugs.

Although reference group effects have been found in a variety of contexts, the research done in the area of political attitudes and reference groups is most germane to the present study. Newcomb (1943) found evidence for reference group influence in shaping attitudes toward public affairs in his famous Bennington College study. Bramgart and Bramgart (1979) found political reference groups to be important in explaining the social judgments and the selectivity of perceptions of student political activists. Raven and Gallo (1965) obtained evidence that indicates that political conventions serve to identify reference group norms and thereby influence attitudes. Dabelko (1976) found that arbitrary federal government standards (reference group

norms) concerning highly relevant issues could influence student attitudes towards these issues. These studies, taken together, show that reference groups can be important in the development and the shaping of political attitudes.

One variable which has not been studied with respect to reference groups and their influence on attitudes is the prior strength and direction of an attitude before reference groups operate to influence an individual. This variable is termed attitude polarization and can be defined as a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward a stimulus, which is associated with some degree of personal commitment. In particular, this study was concerned with the strength of a prior attitude toward an issue and the degree that a reference group could influence said attitude.

This study examined the polarization factor from the logical premise that the less polarized an attitude is, the greater will be the influence of an appropriate reference group on this attitude. This hypothesis is intuitively appealing in that it is plausible to expect an attitude toward an issue that is relatively unknown or unimportant to an individual to be subject to a more successful influence manipulation from an external source. It is also plausible to assume that this would be brought about by an initial lack of information about the issue along with lack of a

firm commitment to any particular perspective and subsequently being dependent on information from a reliable source.

The evidence on the effect of reference groups in changing or shaping attitudes suggests that information that identifies reference group norms can serve to affect an individual's attitude on a given subject. One area where reference groups may impact is public opinion polling. In recent years the use of opinion polls has risen dramatically. The mass media and other agencies are continually reporting the results of polls taken on a variety of topics. There exists the possibility that the results of these opinion polls can serve to identify relevant reference group norms and thus affect subsequent polls taken on the same topic. This study examined the potential effect of the transmission of normative reference group information through the medium of opinion poll results. Thus, an important question that was addressed by this study was, do opinion polls merely analyze the opinions or do they also help to create the opinions?

It was predicted that normative reference group information from both positive and negative reference groups presented through the medium of opinion poll results would affect individual attitude formation and change. It was also predicted that the attitude polarization variable would serve to mediate the effect of reference group influence on attitude formation and change.

Method

Subjects. Subjects were drawn from a pool of introductory psychology students at a large southeastern university. A total of 180 subjects participated in the experiment. Subjects volunteered for the study based on their political party affiliation. Half of the subjects professed to belong to the Democratic political party and the remaining half professed to belong to the Republican political party.

Opinion Poll Questionnaire. An empirically derived opinion questionnaire was used in this study. A pilot questionnaire was administered to a sample of 101 subjects who possessed the same characteristics as the subjects described above. The pilot questionnaire consisted of 35 statements pertaining to various political issues. The spectrum of issues ranged from very salient (ex. The decision to have an abortion should be left solely up to the mother) to very obscure (ex. The bureaucratic structure of the Department of Agriculture should be revised). Subjects were asked to indicate their opinion of each statement by responding to a seven point bipolar scale. The scale corresponded to a continuum ranging from strong disagreement to strong agreement. After administration of the questionnaire the response mean and variance for each item was computed. From the original 35 items, two sets of ten items each were selected on the basis of two criteria: mean

deviation from the neutral point of the bipolar scale and variance. The ten items with the smallest mean deviation and variance were selected and termed the non-polarized set. The ten items that had the largest mean deviation and the smallest variance were selected and termed the polarized set. The questionnaire consisted of these 20 randomly grouped items. Three forms of the final questionnaire were prepared, with all three forms containing the same 20 items in identical order. Two of the final forms contained information purportedly indicating the average opinion of a national survey of either Democrats or Republicans. In actuality the norms were the same on both questionnaires, and were derived by placing the norm a fixed distance away from the mean pilot sample opinion of each item. All norms were placed 1.5 scale units from the mean response obtained in the pilot questionnaire. The norms were also placed on the opposite side of the neutral point with respect to the side of the mean response on the pilot questionnaire. The remaining version of the questionnaire differed from the other two in that no information pertaining to a national survey was given.

Procedure. The opinion questionnaire was administered to homogeneous groups (either all Democrats or Republicans) containing ten subjects each. Subjects were informed that this study wished to compare their opinions to a national sample of

either Democrats or Republicans on certain political issues. Subjects were also informed that in order to allow them to compare themselves to the national sample, information concerning the average opinions of certain political parties would be provided on the questionnaire. The control group was not provided with the normative information, and was only asked to respond to the questionnaire.

Experimental Treatments. There were a total of six experimental groups. There were two control groups (one Democrat and one Republican group) who received no normative information and responded to the questionnaire. There were two positive reference group treatments (one Democrat and one Republican group) which consisted of groups of subjects who received normative information from the questionnaire which purportedly came from a sample of people belonging to the same political party as the subjects. There were two negative reference group treatments that received normative information from the questionnaire which purportedly came from a national sample of people belonging to the opposing political party.

Dependent Measure. Conformity was operationally defined as the difference between the pilot sample mean and the subject's response on the item when the response was in the direction of the provided arbitrary norm. When the response was in the opposite

direction from the arbitrary norm it was operationally defined as reactance (negative conformity). It was not possible to obtain conformity or reactance scores for the control group since no norms were given in the control questionnaire. Deviation scores were obtained for the control group by calculating the difference between each subject's response and the pilot sample mean for each item.

Results

A series of analyses were performed including testing for methodological bias, analysis of variance components, and planned post hoc tests.

Mehodological Analysis. A methodology check was made to insure that the mean responses to the opinion questionnaire items had not undergone a systematic change between the time that the pilot questionnaire was given and the time of the experimental manipulation. A t-test was performed to test for group mean response differences between the pilot sample and the control sample using the null hypothesis that the control group mean deviation was equal to zero. The results of this test provided no evidence to indicate any systematic change in responses for the two administrations of the opinion questionnaire t (58)=.12, $p > .05$.

Analysis of Variance. A three-way ANOVA for repeated measures was conducted on the data. The factors were political

party of subjects (2 levels), type of reference group (3 levels), and a within group factor, item set polarization (2 levels). The results of this analysis are presented in Table 1. As Table 1 shows, a significant two-way interaction between type of reference group and item set polarization was found, as well as a significant main effect for type of reference group.

Insert Table 1 about here

Interaction Planned Comparisons. Based on the results of the three-way ANOVA, planned comparisons were conducted using t-tests to investigate the obtained interaction between type of reference group and item set polarization. It was found that when the items were non-polarized, positive reference groups were associated with significantly greater amounts of conformity, $t(118)=3.79$, $p < .01$, than were negative reference groups. However, when the items were polarized, positive reference groups were not found to be associated with significantly greater amount of conformity than negative reference groups. The means for both sets of items and both types of reference groups appear in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Main Effect Planned Comparisons. As the significant two-way interaction was predicted, it was appropriate to investigate the significant main effect for type of reference group that was obtained in three-way ANOVA. A series of planned comparisons using t-tests were conducted to further investigate the observed reference group effect.

As predicted, subjects who received information supposedly from a positive reference group responded to the opinion questionnaire in a manner such that the mean deviation response for individuals receiving positive reference group information was significantly greater t (118)=3.38, $p < .01$, than for individuals in the control group who received no information. Furthermore, as shown in Table 3, subjects receiving positive reference group information responded to the questionnaire in a conforming manner.

Insert Table 3 about here

Subjects who received positive reference group information conformed to the reference norm to a significantly greater degree t (118)=4.74, $p < .01$, than did subjects who received negative reference group information. The negative reference group information did not have the predicted effect and in fact the

effect of negative reference group information was in the opposite direction, as can be seen in Table 3.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide strong support for the hypothesized role that reference groups play in attitude formation and social perception. The results indicate that providing individuals with information concerning the norms of an appropriate reference group can alter opinions even when the information is arbitrary and incorrect. These findings are made even more important by the fact that the opinions were privately and anonymously expressed, which implies that the opinion alteration was real and not an artifact associated with self-presentation. The fact that the negative reference group information did not have the predicted effect was surprising in light of the previous work in the area. A plausible explanation is that lack of knowledge about positive reference group norms toward an issue places the individual in the position of not knowing whether the negative reference group norm is contrary or coincidental to the position of the positive reference group norm. If this were the case then the negative reference group norm would, for all practical purposes, lose influence potential because it was not in known opposition to a positive reference norm. A negative reference group is defined by the perception

that it threatens or opposes a positive reference group. Therefore, if the opposing political party is not perceived as being in opposition to an individual's own political reference group norms, then the opposing party would lose a large amount of negative orientation and the residual degree of perceived threat would not be sufficient to influence attitudes.

One of the basic purposes of this study was to investigate certain factors that could differentially affect the influence of reference group norms on an individual's social perceptions. Along this line, a major hypothesis of this study concerned the degree of prior attitudinal commitment associated with a social issue, or in other words, the polarization of opinion toward an issue. It was predicted that reference group norms would be more effective in altering opinions regarding an issue if there had been a lack of prior opinion commitment than if there had been a prior commitment to a directional opinion. The results of this study provide support for this hypothesis. A significant reference group effect was found for the set of issues that were previously defined as non-polarized. This implies that where there had been a lack of commitment to one opinion or another, reference group normative information served to bring about an attitude that was consistent with the reference group norm. Conversely, where there had been a commitment to an opinion, the

reference group normative information was not effective in altering the opinion. This is consistent with the theoretical stance advanced by Merton and Kitt (1950) which proposes that reference groups serve to structure an individual's social reality. Where there is little or no structure, reference groups can be effective in providing anchoring points, but where there already exists a structure (opinion), reference groups play a less important role.

The goal of this study was to experimentally manipulate the effect of reference group norm information in a controlled manner and thereby investigate certain hypothesized functional characteristics of the process by which individuals respond to reference group norms that are presented as opinion poll results. The findings indicate that the experimental manipulation was effective. It seems that individuals do respond to positive reference groups by adopting, to a degree, the norms of the group. The findings also show that the individual's response is affected by prior attitudes. However, the limitations of this study do not allow the drawing of any conclusions as to the longevity of the effect or the type of attitude (i.e. political, moral, etc.) which is most affected by this type of influence.

The use of opinion poll results as a medium to convey normative reference group information, as was done in this study,

brings to light a factor that has important implications. It appears that it is possible to alter an individual's attitude toward a political issue merely by presenting the individual with relevant opinion poll results. At least in the political arena, the practical ramifications of the results of this study are immense. This study suggests that attitudes toward an issue may be manipulated by providing targeted groups of people with selected opinion poll results, especially if it a new issue where attitude polarization is negligible.

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Table 1

Summary table of Analysis of Variance for Political Party of Reference Group (PP), Type of Reference Group (RG), and Polarization of Item Set (PI)

Source	df	SS	MS	F
PP	1	1.62	1.62	.05
RG	2	1205.16	603.58	17.02*
PI	1	93.23	93.23	3.04
S (RG x PP)	174	6160.65	35.40	1.15
PP x RG	2	50.99	25.49	.72
PP x PI	1	8.16	8.16	.27
RG x PI	2	378.89	189.45	6.17*
PP x RG x PI	2	10.92	5.46	.18

*$p < .05$

Table 2

Mean Conformity Responses for the Interaction Between Type of Reference Group and Item Set Polarization

	Polarized Items	Non-Polarized Items
Positive Reference Group	3.82	5.11
Negative Reference Group	1.98	1.38

Table 3

Mean Deviation Responses for Reference Group Treatments and Control

Treatment	Non_Polarized	Polarized	Total
Positive Reference	5.11	3.82	4.47
Control Group	-1.80	1.89	.04
Negative Reference	1.38	1.98	1.65

Author Notes

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